

A rapid evidence assessment of Operation Fortress: a multi-agency initiative to tackle the harm and violence associated with the trade in illicit drugs in Southampton

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Date of review: 8th August 2013

Abstract

Operation Fortress is a multi-agency initiative to tackle drugs and violence in Southampton. The researchers examined similar initiatives to identify 'what works' in reducing the harms associated with drug trafficking and use in communities and critically evaluated Fortress in the light of that analysis. It was found that the initiative had incorporated much of the learning from similar partnership projects and had built on their successes. The purposively chosen research sample was relatively small. Nevertheless, the researchers are satisfied that the findings are representative of the wider population. Research respondents highlighted as key: the expertise of the operation's police leaders; their focus on reducing harm in communities rather than on performance targets; their effective communication with partners and with their communities; and, particularly, the marketing of the operation which firmly established the positive value of the 'Fortress' brand. Fortress should be celebrated as an example of good practice in partnership working. The study also suggests the need for more effective national and regional support for local efforts if successes like this are in future to represent partnership norms.

Key words: multi-agency working; partnership; rapid evidence assessment; integrated operating model

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a rapid evidence assessment of Hampshire Constabulary and Southampton City Council's Operation Fortress, which was commissioned by the force. The assessment was carried out between June and August 2013, just over one year into the two-year life of the operation. Its purpose was to answer the question; 'To what extent is Operation Fortress achieving its aims of preventing or reducing people's involvement in drugs and violent crime, either as victims or offenders'?

Methodology

We addressed the research question through a review of the most relevant existing literature, by observing Fortress internal meetings and public briefings, and by conducting a series of semi-structured interviews (n=12) with a purposive sample of individuals intimately involved in the operation.

As the time available to carry out the evaluation was extremely limited (just 90 days), the Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) method was used. The first phase of this assessment was a search of the existing literature on multi-agency interventions relevant to the activity under investigation. The aim of that examination was to critically analyse similar studies to identify what has proven to be successful in preventing or reducing people's involvement in drugs and violent crime. That assessment was made using a scale devised by Sherman et al (1997) at the University of Maryland. They argued that strong evidence of causality can only be shown by studies using a robust comparison group design. Only seven of the papers we collected (authored by: Butler et al, 2004; Pitts, 2007; Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007; Centre for Social Justice 2009; Kinsella,

2011; Home Office, 2011; and van Staden et al, 2011) met the 'robust' criterion and these were identified for detailed assessment.

Our literature suggested the following key indicators of success in partnership working: the need for a consistent focus on problem solving; visible and committed leadership; effective engagement with all partners; the targeting of behaviours; effective marketing of the partnership initiative; the effective and consistent exploitation of intervention opportunities; the establishment of an effective mechanism for exchanging information; and the participation in the initiative of community and voluntary groups.

The next step was to assess the extent to which those indicators had influenced operational plans and actions. Interview respondents from the force and its partners were invited to reflect upon those indicators. Due to the limited time available to complete the study, we selected a purposive sample of respondents from the operational team and their partners. Respondents were chosen for their professional knowledge, their experiences of the operation, or their knowledge of drug trafficking and violence in Southampton

Limitations of the research

We recognise the limitations of the chosen method. There are both pros and cons to the REA approach (see for example Joliffe and Farrington, 2007; Davies, 2003) on that subject). However, REAs have become an accepted way of carrying out research in the social sciences and have been used extensively as a way of harnessing the best available research evidence on social problems and the interventions of social agencies. It has been argued that determining what is already known about the issue in question as a precursor to a new evaluation in

the same field is both ‘obvious and vitally important’ and that the REA represents an acceptable compromise between ‘what is desirable’ and ‘what is possible’ (Civil Service, 2013, p.1).

We also are cognisant of the limitations of purposive sampling. However, in this case it was methodologically consistent and an efficient method that balanced the desirable with the possible and delivered real insights into the operation and the challenges facing social agencies in the city. That approach allowed us to say something meaningful about the efforts of public sector professionals in those contexts. We acknowledge that as a result our analysis necessarily reflects a relatively narrow, though we argue well-informed, set of views on the operation, its processes, and outcomes.

This paper is based solely on publicly available information and semi-structured interviews with research respondents. The research team did not request, and were not made privy to any sensitive Fortress, Hampshire Constabulary, or Southampton City Council data.

Research Findings

This section presents the findings from the interviews sorted according to the discrete themes (the key indicators) we identified. It also addresses the issue of the force’s proposed exit strategy, a subject that (as might be expected) was of great interest to the force and its partners.

Without exception, respondents spoke of the way in which those leading Fortress consistently sought to move the police beyond an orthodox crime control agenda. A clear message was that though the police recognized that performance data was important, a focus on such data can skew activity and

outputs. An argument advanced forcefully and consistently was that Fortress represented a new approach to the problems of drugs and violence in Southampton. That approach relied on more sophisticated efforts by police and partners to restrict the supply of illicit drugs, to reduce the demand for drugs, and to rebuild communities blighted by the violence associated with problematic drug use. A voluntary sector respondent said that they felt that the police's efforts in this regard were consistently well-intentioned and praiseworthy. Particularly, when the police's attempts to achieve a balance between enforcement and treatment were being made against the background of the 'inherent contradictions' in Government policy towards the policing of drugs.

Respondents commented on the impact of Fortress on the supply of drugs and on the levels of violence in Southampton. Overall, the impression was that Fortress had been very successful in restricting supply. We saw crime data produced by the force that supported a police respondent's assertion that drug related violence in the city had reduced, quarter on quarter, during the life of the operation. Respondents from Southampton's Drugs and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) and from the voluntary sector said that Fortress had been less effective in reducing demand for drugs in the city but that needed to be seen in the context of the market, which was in flux. A DAAT respondent said that the demographic of heroin use in the city was changing and that there was potential for a significant shift in the medium to longer term. For example, he had observed a noticeable reduction in the number of heroin and crack cocaine users in the city and an increase in users purchasing legal highs via the Internet (which we argue, provides another dimension to the 'local to global' debate).

Respondents consistently talked about their commitment to finding long-term solutions for what were recognized universally as complex social problems. A drugs worker said that in their experience the level of cooperation and communication between the police and their partners was ‘unprecedented’, which was a hugely significant factor in partners’ commitment to finding new ways of dealing with those problems. Police respondents highlighted the expertise that the Fortress team had developed in addressing the problems of drugs, violence, and organized crime in Southampton.

Perhaps, one of the most innovative ways of supporting communities was the joint commissioning (by the police and Southampton City Council) of the play, ‘Mum can you lend me £20 quid’? A gritty true-life portrayal of the lives of twin brothers who became addicted to heroin. The play was extremely well received by its audiences in the city. Some concern was expressed that the expertise would be lost at the conclusion of the operation. However, several respondents argued that this should be tempered with the understanding that staff would transfer their knowledge to their new workplaces.

A head teacher said that Fortress had allowed its partners to feel that there was some redress for those individuals whose lives were affected by drug-related criminal activity. The head praised a lesson plan that Fortress had developed and shared with schools for helping to expand knowledge of how to deal with those issues, across service providers. They felt that more work could usefully be done in that way. For example, they hoped that the police would offer a short free continuous professional development (CPD) experience for teachers that would enable them to use the experience and knowledge they gained from the police in lesson planning and school assemblies.

Key to any problem solving process is information about the nature and extent of the problem that needs to be confronted. In that context, two issues emerged that we feel should be of concern to the force's commanders. The first was whether or not what had developed in Southampton was a 'gang' problem of the kind seen in many of the larger urban conurbations both here in the UK and elsewhere. The second was the way in which, despite the efforts of some in the force, a focus on priority crime (that is, crime measured by the Home Office) may have skewed the force's intelligence collection and analysis processes.

All the research respondents commented on the quality of the leadership of the operation. Its leaders were seen as expert, highly visible, and fully committed to achieving the operation's aims. One voluntary sector respondent said that for all that the police had been 'really good' in reaching out to partners, there still was a perception that Fortress was a partnership approach that the police were controlling. However, the same respondent also said that the operation had been led 'extremely ably', which reflects the challenge the police face in achieving an appropriate balance in multi-agency work of this kind.

The partnership was made up of the police, the city council, local drugs action and youth offending teams, and community and voluntary groups. Overall our impression was that respondents recognized effective partnership working was key to achieving Fortress's aims. Police respondents said that they were wholly committed to the multi-agency approach. Partners publicly had expressed their support for the operation from the outset and that support seemed never to have wavered. Certainly, we were struck by the enthusiasm shown for the project by our non-police respondents.

All respondents considered the marketing of the operation one of its greatest strengths. Our research suggests that the Fortress brand has been established and overwhelmingly is viewed as positive by police, partners and the communities of Southampton. That the brand was so successful was the product of careful planning and the identification of a Fortress middle manager as a single point of contact for partners and also for the rest of the force.

The enforcement elements of any intervention should be implemented consistently. Researchers examining similar initiatives have found that the most effective strategies use community groups and outreach programmes to help pursue a policy that balanced the 'carrots' of social intervention programmes with the 'sticks' of law enforcement interventions. Respondents felt that the Hampshire force was achieving that same balance.

Respondents were especially keen to talk about the reflexivity of those who led the operation and the way in which, as a result, Fortress had evolved. In the first phase of the operation there had been a focus on enforcement activity, which had attracted lots of media attention and established the brand. However, that had quickly given way to approaches that engaged partners; that utilized 'softer' policing skills and a wider range of police staff. For example, a member of the force's communication team described the recent execution of a drugs search warrant by a team from the force's Western area. Once the searched premises were secured, members of the local safer neighbourhoods teams (SNT) went into the local community to explain the action and to field any complaints.

The SNT also utilized the, highly visible and readily identifiable, Fortress-liveried police van. That linked the policing activity undertaken to the Fortress brand even though the commitment of the operation's resources was minimal. A

DAAT respondent said that Fortress staff had been good at listening to people and understanding that low level perpetrators were also victims of crime; that had translated into a different experience in terms of the consequences of arrest and the way they were been treated whilst in detention.

All respondents agreed that the initiative had encouraged information sharing between the partners and improved upon the force's ability to communicate with its partners. The key factors in that improvement were the respective managements' buy-in to the principle of sharing, and the development of cooperative relationships between practitioners within the discrete elements of the partnership. Some concerns were expressed that information was not always shared on a case by case basis when needed but respondents said that at the strategic governance level, there was an overt commitment to data sharing from most partners (the National Health Service was seen as the one cause for concern).

Police respondents felt that information within police databases at the national, regional, force, and local databases was not shared as well as it might have been. We saw scant evidence of the influence of the integrated operating model (IOM), introduced by the last Government (Home Office, 2009) and lauded by the current Coalition (Home Office, 2011, p.16) as the means by which police would deliver a 'tiered response' to the crime problems associated with gang crime. The same group felt that information largely was shared effectively enough to ensure that partners' services were deployed appropriately when the need was identified and also that other public-facing communication methods (such as the use of social networking media) were effective in disseminating information, asking for assistance, etc., from the wider community.

Overall, respondents felt that Fortress built on existing partnerships such as Southampton Connect, the Safe City Partnership, the local safeguarding children and adults' boards, and the Partnership of Southampton Education Forum. They also felt that community and voluntary groups consistently were engaged by the police in productive ways and cited various examples of the engagement in community activities of Fortress staff.

Life after Fortress – essentially when funding ended - exercised the minds of police respondents to a much greater degree than non-police respondents. That is not to suggest that the latter were unappreciative of the police's efforts; far from it. However, it does once again point to the central challenge of effective partnership work; the competing and often conflicting aims, organizational imperatives, and cultures of partners and the immense challenge of keeping multi-agency initiatives like this on track.

Analysis of findings

In terms of Fortress' effectiveness, respondents left us in no doubt that they felt that the operation was achieving its aims of restricting the supply of drugs and of raising the profile of partnership work and youth crime in Southampton. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the complexity of the drugs issue in modern society, Fortress was perceived to have had less success in reducing the demand for drugs. Whilst there has been universal support for the operation and a substantial commitment to it by partners, respondents from the city council and the DAAT felt that their respective organisations could have done more to support the operation. For the council, that would involve a more effective implementation of its youth crime agenda and working more effectively with the

voluntary sector to identify vulnerable people in communities. For the DAAT, that would require more resources for its offender management and drug referral processes. The city council respondent said that in their view the police 'had done the best they could in the climate they currently have to work within', which we argue is about as unequivocal a statement of support for those leading the operation as one could reasonably expect to hear.

Many respondents (police and non-police alike) suggested that the Fortress brand was so well established, and had achieved so much, that it should be considered a permanent fixture in the force; a template for all future partnership work. A police respondent supported consideration of a rebranding exercise in which the word 'Operation' (which to them inferred police dominance of the partnership, and impermanence) should be excised from the brand. However, respondents also recognized that initiatives like Fortress can be difficult to sustain if targets for priority crimes (such as burglary and robbery) are not met. As many researchers have found, performance targets - which frequently attract scarce resources on the basis of 'what gets measured must be done' – always have the potential to skew organizational behaviour (see for example Collier, 2006)).

It has long been recognized that the police alone cannot resolve the problem of crime. Underpinned by an ethos that can be traced back to Robert Peel, Britain's police service has always relied on the assistance of its communities to tackle crime and disorder, and on the (at least tacit) approval of its communities for the actions the police take on their behalf - the principle of policing by consent. There is nothing new about partnership working, which is so central to the Fortress mission. Executive recognition of the efficacy of formal

partnership as long ago as 1998, led to the statutory establishment of crime reduction (later community safety) partnerships via the Crime and Disorder Act.

In reality, achieving the goals of restricting supply, reducing demand *and* rebuilding blighted communities requires energy, commitment and, above all, synergy between relevant partners. However as Gilling (2005, p.737) has argued, partnership working represents a complex social phenomenon in which individual actors must put aside their own 'baggage' (in the shape of their professional ideologies, and occupational and organisational cultures) in the interest of the partnership and the communities that they serve. Partnerships require the investment of time and energy from every participant, if they are to be effective (Gilling, 2005)

Recently, the whole notion of partnership has been boosted by the announcement of Home Office policies that have sought to refocus law enforcement efforts to tackle organized crime in ways that 'put an emphasis on preventative and self-protection work, alongside a focus on enforcement activity' (Home Office, 2011, p.3). That is, in ways which 'STEM the opportunities for organized crime... STRENGTHEN enforcement against organized criminals... [and] SAFEGUARD communities, businesses and the state (Home Office, 2011, p.7); and which will allow the NCA and its partners to PURSUE (offenders), PREVENT (organized crime), PROTECT (communities) and PREPARE (for the consequences of those crimes) (Home Office, 2013).¹

Arguably, one of the drivers for those developments is a greater understanding of the reality of organized crime in Western democracies. Often, it is not the scourge or plague visited on innocent communities by committed, wicked, and venal 'others', as it has so often been portrayed, but a largely

disorganized (often chaotic), profit-driven, activity that may be directed by outsiders but which seeks (and usually finds) willing collaborators, both as foot soldiers and as customers, within communities. The belief that the increasing involvement of outsiders (in this case, groups and individuals from the London area) in organized crime in Southampton was causing previously unseen levels of conflict and violence in the city was a significant driver for the Fortress plan. Certainly, there was evidence to support the view that some outsiders were to blame for the upsurge in violence in the city.

Beyond that, during the period of the research, Sussex Police (a near neighbour of the Hampshire force) operated Operation 'Reduction' in Brighton. This was a collaboration between treatment organisations, the police and the council that aimed to get treatment for low-level users and dealers, thereby allowing more police resources to be diverted towards the traffickers and perpetrators of violence. That force too has reported the increasing influence of London-based criminals in the south coast drugs trade with London dealers targeting the vulnerable to use their flats in the towns of Brighton and Hove as the base for their drug-running operations in a technique known as 'cuckooing' (Vowles, 2013, p.1). That suggests that the developments in Southampton described above may be part of a wider shift in the organized crime and drugs milieus.

An alternative explanation for the increasing violence in Southampton was advanced by two non-police respondents. They, separately, reported that some of their clients pointed to the success of previous Hampshire Police-led anti-drug initiatives, (Operations Phoenix and Phoenix II – which were known as the 'Rat on a Rat' campaigns) in removing local dealers, as being at the root

of the problem (see Southampton Safer City Partnership, 2014). The suggestion was that the police action had created a vacuum that had been filled by those, outsiders, now directing the trade.

We should qualify that statement; it was not advanced as truth but rather as an impression of the views held by some in Southampton's communities. Furthermore, it was not a view that found much favour with the police respondents. However, there is research which suggests that police intervention in drug markets can lead to a dislocation of the market that can in turn lead to an increase in violence as new suppliers compete for custom (see for example UKDPC, 2012, p.14); the idea is not without foundation even if it may not necessarily be true in this case.

Initially, respondents seemed to disagree on the extent to which the problems that Fortress was created to ameliorate, were 'home grown' or were attributable to outsiders. Though a consensus emerged that the increase in violence was due to the exploitation of local suppliers and local markets by criminals (according to one police respondent) 'higher up the food chain' in London. The same respondent advanced the theory that London-based criminal networks were 'spreading their wings' to avoid enforcement activity in the capital and to escape already 'saturated' drugs markets. Unknown, and therefore not targeted by the police in Southampton, these 'cuckoos' had been able to develop their new ventures with relatively little hindrance before the establishment of Fortress.

As the reader saw earlier, there was a 'reluctance' (a word used repeatedly by respondents) to term the problems in Southampton 'gang-related' though the word 'gang' also cropped up in most of our interviews. Clearly, there

is nervousness around the term based on its potential to harm, through labelling and the consequent stigmatization, the very communities that Fortress seeks to help and support. We are sensitive to those views. However, we feel that at the heart of the solution to any problem is the accurate definition of that problem and that the question of just what problem in Southampton the partnership is trying to resolve, is worthy of further analysis and reflection.

Tangentially, the same respondent described the dearth of information on drugs available to the police before the Fortress initiative. That was attributed to too great a focus on priority crime and an unwillingness to reward individuals for drugs information, which of course discouraged potential informers coming forward. That view was advanced by a single individual and we were unable to corroborate it in the time available to us so we resist the temptation to make what might be considered to be sweeping generalisations about police commanders' focus and grip. However, whilst we recognise the many and varied challenges facing police forces, we argue that the danger of not taking cross border crime sufficiently seriously and in that context, effective environmental scanning and the accurate identification of problems are absolutely key to developing a comprehensive and accurate intelligence picture and securing National Intelligence Model compliance.²

The IOM was designed: to encourage the direction of law enforcement resources in ways that have the greatest harm reduction impact on organized crime; to ensure that all government agencies play their part in that process; and to ensure that all partners are engaged effectively at home and abroad (Home Office, 2009). Despite the introduction of Regional Organized Crime Units (ROCU),³ the shortcomings of the Serious Organized Crime Agency

(SOCA) (which were well known to the Home Office and to policing professionals though rather less well documented) have meant that the Home Office's plans for an effective system for the direction and coordination of resources (known to the police as a tasking and coordinating process – or 'T&C') has not been as well developed as it might have been. The result has been that organized criminals and cross border crime has not been tackled as effectively and intervention opportunities have not been exploited well enough. It is to be hoped that SOCA's replacement, the National Crime Agency (NCA), will provide greater assistance in that context. Certainly, the rhetoric emerging from the new agency suggests that partnership working in ways that meet the expectations of stakeholders and communities will be central to its efforts (NCA, 2013).

Our research suggested that these developments are significant in the context of initiatives like Operation Fortress. Certainly an effective 'T&C' process that provided a forum for the exchange of information and best practice, which supported forces and allowed them to obtain regional and national assistance in dealing with cross-border crime would mitigate the risk of mission drift at the local level. Two facts that emerged in the research gave us cause to doubt that the existing arrangements were sufficiently well-developed. The first was that the Fortress police staff we spoke to were unaware of the Brighton operation; the second was that the operational team clearly was struggling to tackle the cross-border (usually London-based) offenders it identified, and to continue to support its neighbourhood teams in Southampton. We were satisfied that the members of the force that we interviewed, understood the importance of that local response in the contexts of the operation's legitimacy and continuing public support for the police more generally.

As we noted earlier, the force's exit strategy exercised police respondents much more than partners. However, there was unanimity that the operation should continue in one form or another if the funding was available. The preferred option was that Fortress should continue as it is currently configured but that view was tempered with the knowledge that the necessary funding simply may not be forthcoming. Respondents felt that the next best option would be a scaled down version to which all organized anti-drugs and violence activity, media releases, etc., would be attributed. However, a fear was expressed that without an enforcement capability Fortress would very quickly be seen as a 'toothless tiger'. Even though we recognize the pressures on Police and Crime Commissioners and police commanders in this age of austerity for the public services, we share those concerns.

Conclusion

We were set the task of assessing the extent to which Operation Fortress was: restricting the supply of illicit drugs; reducing the violence associated with that trade; reducing the demand for drugs; and helping to rebuild communities. Our research suggests that Fortress restricted drug supply, reduced drug-related violence significantly, and had a positive impact on Southampton's communities.

The evidence that Fortress helped to reduce the demand for drugs is equivocal though it must be recognized that activity of this kind has rarely made a significant impact on demand. Problematic drug use develops for complex reasons. Those may include an individual's genetic or biological make-up, their

personality, their personal and family histories, and their social circumstances.

Few of those can be influenced by the police in meaningful ways.

Significant factors in Fortress's success (that it shared with other successful initiatives) were the leadership of the operation, its focus on reducing harm rather than on performance targets, and effective communication with partners (that underpinned their efforts to support drug users and secured their continuing enthusiastic participation). Where Fortress's leaders seemed to go further than the norm was in their marketing of the operation, which established the value of the Fortress brand and consistently struck the right balance between celebrating the successes of the operational team and disseminating messages that highlight the partnership's commitment to public safety and security.

Whilst recognising that this is a small-scale study, we highlight that police respondents questioned whether the arrangements that existed in the summer of 2013 (under the auspices of the now defunct SOCA) to support forces were sufficient to support the kinds of cross-border operations that their intelligence assessments suggested also were necessary. In that context, the Home Office's renewed commitment to the IOM and effective partnership working, particularly its introduction of the NCA and the enhancement of the existing ROCUs, should be welcomed.

Whether Fortress should or should not be extended, strictly is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we contend that there are compelling reasons to extend the operation even if just like our research respondents we recognise today's financial realities and the competing demands on the force's executive and its Police and Crime Commissioner. That should not necessarily preclude a

search for alternative funding for the existing model or for another model that can consolidate the Fortress gains. At the very least, the learning from Fortress should be institutionalized as a way of developing policy and promoting best practice in partnership working both within and beyond the force and its partner agencies.

¹ This framework was first developed for the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST. The four areas of activity are: prosecuting and disrupting people engaged in serious and organized criminality (Pursue); preventing such activity (Prevent); increasing protections against such activity (Protect); and reducing the consequences of such activity (Prepare).

² The National Intelligence Model (NIM) established a set of standard operating procedures for operational policing in England and Wales.

³ There are currently nine police ROCUs in England and Wales. The vision is that these will be increased in number and be co-located with the 18 regional NCA offices. Each ROCU should have a Government Agency Intelligence Network (GAIN) coordinator, who is responsible for coordinating policing activity with the work of bodies such as local trading standards offices and the Environment Agency.

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